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## A View of the 1998 Québec Election Campaign

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ON THE LAST STRETCH of the 1998 election campaign, I decided to be personal: therefore my qualification, “A” view.

I share the view of this campaign context outlined in the previous presentation by Louis Massicotte of the Université de Montréal:

- Charest moved into a very depressed environment. The economy was not only perceived as gloomy, it really was in Montréal. And it had been for many years.

- The state of Québec’s public finances was uncertain. It had been long thought that the election would be held in the spring of 1999, thus allowing us to see the bottom line, i.e. that the objective of zero-deficit had been attained. This was to be the cornerstone of the separatists’ campaign: balancing the books would free the Québec government of any pressure from outside.

- The state of the public health system was to be a major issue in this campaign. However, public perceptions were overlooked by political strategists: Quebeckers agreed, by a large majority, that the system had to be fixed. Even though they said it hurt, they believed “Liberals would not have done better!”

- And as far as the future of Québec was concerned, close to three Quebeckers out of four did not want to face another referendum in the foreseeable future.

The objective of Charest supporters, and to some extent the ultimate dream of Quebeckers, at the time (April 1998) was: *How do we get rid of the referendum cloud while keeping Bouchard’s star shining?*

To a large extent, Charest was a quick fix for a very complicated problem.

1. The Supreme Court decision defused the issue of another referendum in two ways:

- By saying that the conditions of a winning referendum had to be defined in advance (and agreed to by the rest of Canada, although this second part of the equation has been temporarily lost), it made it a safe proposition. Nobody plans for failure.

- By saying that a “winning” referendum would set an obligation, for the rest of Canada, of negotiating with Québec, it eliminated the possibility of such a referendum leading to an impasse.

2. The state of the economy did not look so bad after all:

A series of reports—in *The Globe and Mail* on short-term growth, linked to reconstruction efforts after the ice storm, and in *The National Post* on headquarters based in Québec and on the 700 billion assets they “control,” and *Statistics Canada* monthly figures on employment—these reports all confirmed, indeed, that the actual situation was not so gloomy after all.

### *Then Came the Campaign Strategies*

Jean Charest had to demonstrate that he would do better on the economy, and on governing practices (the so-called “governance” of Québec), and on the future of Québec in a Canada governed by Liberals-under-Chrétien.

1. The situation looked gloomy indeed, but Quebeckers, like any other Canadians, vastly approved of the zero-deficit objective. They also wanted the best of two worlds; that is, no reduction on health, education, social services and tax cuts. Bouchard promised them all.

Charest tried to convince Quebeckers that, on this ground, he could outdo the Parti Québécois plan because there would be a premium for the mere election of a federalist government in Québec, the “Charest effect,” which would be an overall rate of growth of 3.5 per cent, compared to the two per cent foreseen by various economic forecasters under a PQ government. Unfortunately, the research provided by Liberal strategists, and an amateurish document released by Charest during the campaign, were far from convincing! (These documents were far inferior to, for example, the Liberal *Red Book* of the Federal campaign of 1993.)

2. Health care was to be *the* issue of the 1998 campaign. Indeed, the Liberals were lucky enough to fight a government facing, during “Week Two,” a series of embarrassing revelations: the threat of massive resignations at a local hospital in the very riding of Premier Lucien Bouchard, and a secret agreement with the Federation of Physicians providing for them to be paid overtime. This was to alleviate the risk of shortage of general practitioners during the election campaign. And the release of a secret scientific—although not complete—study on the effect on ageing populations of a new Drug Insurance Plan. For five days in a row, the incumbent government was put on a defensive mode, but ... it did not impact in public opinion polls.

I think the Liberals failed in demonstrating that, while the reform of the health care system was necessary, the problem did not come from a shortage of money, but rather from bad administration of the system. Therefore, the debate over “governance” never took place. Indeed, highly respected experts had referred, before the campaign, to the emergence of an insensible “*nomenclatura*” and to a phenomenon of “*sovietization*” in the practice of medicine in Québec. That was the debate to be held that never was .... Thus the general conclusion: “The Liberals would do no better!”

On the contrary, very early references to the “Harris Revolution,” and poor research by Liberal strategists to prove that their claim was true and/or by the general media to document it, did the rest.

3. The major plank of the Charest Liberals was to guarantee political stability by promising to have better relations with the rest of Canada, and not to hold a referendum during their mandate.

Let me say from the outset that abandoning the right to hold a referendum amounts to throwing your weaponry in a garbage bin! Monsieur Bourassa cleverly said, particularly in uncertain times such as after the failure of Meech Lake: “Not necessarily a referendum, but a referendum if necessary.” For a minority to solemnly renounce its ultimate power, which is its political sovereignty as expressed by a democratic majority, seems to me extremely risky. Yes, Quebecers do not want a referendum, but they do want to keep the right to hold one, particularly if it is a “winning” one.

As far as “better relations with the rest of Canada” were concerned, Jean Charest was undercut by the very clever strategy of Lucien Bouchard.

Very early on, in August in Saskatoon, Lucien Bouchard signed an important agreement with the other premiers on the establishment of a new Social Union for Canada. This signature had the double effect of showing that Québec was no longer isolated, and that, of course, important issues could be solved with the federal government under a Parti Québécois government.

What could Charest do differently? Not much indeed; any other option would have made him perceived as a weak leader. This conclusion was reached by many Quebeckers since:

a) Contrary to advice he had received when he came to the liberal party, Charest waited too long to distance himself from the people who had sent him to Québec, particularly the federal Liberal establishment;

b) Jean Chrétien did his best too, by giving a silly interview to *La Presse*, saying the constitutional agenda for reform was no general store, and adding that, in any case, the store was closed. Unfortunately for Charest, the Québec governments, particularly federalist ones, always have a shopping list for Ottawa!

When Charest suggested that if Chrétien were to become an obstacle to the renewal of federalism he would have to go, he did not look credible.

### *The Differentiating Factor*

At the time of the leaders' debate, about halfway through the campaign, the battle was probably lost for Charest. Léger et Léger polls moved as follows:

- a comfortable lead (48.7 to 44.9 per cent) in early October;
- a tie in late October and early November (47.5 to 46.2 per cent for the Parti Québécois, and 47.9 to 46.9 per cent for the Liberals);
- a substantial lead for the Parti Québécois in mid November (46.8 to 44.9 per cent—close to two points). This is also the time when the vote for Mario Dumont's Action démocratique started to move up.

However, some suggest that the referendum issue might have constituted a "differentiating factor." This was the only issue on which Quebeckers agreed by a majority of two to one. The "No Referendum" campaign, which you see going on now, never leveled off, probably because Charest was not convincing. As I said earlier,

the issue was neutralized by Bouchard's clever move of referring constantly, particularly during the debate, to his "winning—not losing—never losing" proposition. And I am not sure French Quebecers want to renounce the one opportunity they have to express a majority opinion on their destiny. I suggest that this television debate turned out to be a disastrous waste of time—close to one week in a 32-day campaign.

### *The "Winning" Campaign*

For the Parti Québécois, the attitude—any attitude—of the federal government creates a win-win situation. The harder Chrétien looks, the better it prepares another failure of federalism. "It never works with them," says Bouchard.

After the stage was set in Saskatoon for a moderate premier able to dialogue and strike a deal with other premiers, a twofold message hit Charest right in the chin:

- at the launching of his campaign, Bouchard suggested that "Charest doesn't really like Québec." It meant: beware of this guy, he may not be a strong defender of Québec's interests, particularly with a Chrétien in Ottawa;

- then, through the end, Bouchard appealed to federalists: "If you really want progress along the lines of the twenty-two powers Bourassa was asking for, you might as well vote for me."

Strangely enough, nobody—aside from Jean Charest, of course—challenged this proposition. The premiers were trapped: they had signed with Bouchard in August and to deny him the right "to go negotiate and conclude a social pact with Ottawa"—right away, before the coming federal budget—was virtually impossible. This silence, to me, has been deafening! Charest was right to say that it looks rather strange to say that you want to renew federalism and propose at the same time to break the federation one or two years later. The problem is that Charest was alone in saying that.

The other thing—which may be historical—is that Bouchard succeeded in shifting the women's vote in his favour. The Parti Québécois started the campaign with a traditional deficit of seven to eight percentage points with respect to the female vote. By this week, the women's vote was virtually the same as the men's vote.

This might be of significant consequence for any future referendum. Indeed, there has been much discussion of the “French vote.” With these voters, the Liberals started the campaign with a 15-point deficit. By the end of the campaign, the gap had been increased to 20 points. The reason, in my opinion, is not a change in voting patterns for francophones. But, moving 7 or 8 percentage points of women voters towards his party, and 80 per cent of women being French speaking themselves (80 per cent of 7 makes 5–6 per cent altogether), the drop in support for the Liberals among French voters is due to the elimination of the so-called “gender gap.” If it holds, this might be of great consequence for the future since the “Yes” camp for sovereignty needs to be as high as 58–60 per cent among French voters.

Indeed, this change in voting patterns in the women’s vote, coupled with the attitude of federal politicians and some incidents such as the decision of the Canadian Olympic Committee to postpone its decision for the choice of a Canadian city candidate for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games—Vancouver, Calgary, or Québec—contributed to a polarization of the vote: French-“Others,” Montréal-Rest of Québec.

### *The Leaders*

Lucien Bouchard had a very astute campaign, posing as a statesman, in full control as he was during the ice storm, as reassuring as a good husband/father could be.

If anything, Mario Dumont reinforced the cynicism of voters towards the leaders of the two “old” parties. The support for his party, as expected after the positive exposure he had in the debate, jumped from a traditional six per cent to more than ten per cent. It will not hold, but it might remain high enough to spoil lots of ballots, therefore contributing to a landslide victory for the Parti Québécois. Forecasts during the weekend went from 81 to 95 seats for the Parti Québécois—compared with the 77 seats it had on 12 September 1994 under the leadership of Jacques Parizeau (PLQ 47, ADQ 1).

One major problem for Jean Charest was that he was considered, by some, as a “parachute candidate,” who had little familiarity with or sensitivity to Québec issues. This perception was reinforced by the fact that major figures from the Québec Liberal par-

ty's past—Daniel Johnson Jr. and Claude Ryan in particular—were not seen around. On the other hand, Parizeau was very visible and looked extremely loyal to his party leader.

Charest was also seen as a lame-duck candidate. He has been the target of very harsh criticism, partly because of the leadership campaign in the Conservative party. When he launched his bid to lead the Québec Liberal party, Charest said: "I chose Québec!" It did not take long for Quebecers to wonder—and indeed this is what Mario Dumont emphatically asked during the televised debate—"What was the alternative?" Charest never really answered this question and that hurt him a lot.

### *The Outcome*

It is always risky to predict any electoral decision. But we are now six days away from the vote. Jean Charest's campaign looked dispirited at a major rally in Montréal last Saturday. Unless his "No-Referendum" campaign gets off the ground, everything looks pretty much set. Actually, one talks of a swing now, which would mean one could get closer and closer to the 95–100 seat level. I remind you that, in 1973, Bourassa went as far as winning 102 seats out of 110. The approval rate for the government, then and now, is the figure to watch.

Contrary to what was done during the 1995 referendum campaign, major rallies with federal leaders, or some expression of a popular movement in the rest of Canada, are not desirable in an election campaign. Charest is on his own now.

### *Our Four Next Steps into the 21st Century*

Once again, Canada figured it had a quick fix to settle the Québec issue. Once again it failed miserably. I am amazed, and somewhat saddened, to see that the first to stab Charest in the back are the same who were sending him to Québec as a Messiah. Last week, a front-page story in *The Globe and Mail* read: "The guy has no bones." So much for a guy who spent his entire career fighting for Canada. This plays right into the hand of Lucien Bouchard: "They don't like us."

1. It used to be said that Charest was sort of a "two for one," that is in the eventuality—unthinkable in the spring—that he would not defeat Lucien Bouchard, but he would be there to lead the No

forces. Therefore, it would be impossible for the Parti Québécois to garner its “winning conditions.”

Forget about this scenario now. Jean Charest has never been accepted within the Liberal party. On the contrary, he made no efforts and imposed his own “true blue” advisors on the Grit group. The transplanting never succeeded and we are now at the stage of dismissal.

This means that a few days after the election, Charest will announce he will go, or he will be forced to go. The Liberal party, and the federalist forces, will be left leaderless.

2. We are in for a major set of federal-provincial negotiations over the social union, and beyond that, over the use of federal budget surplus. Québec is part of the Saskatoon declaration which calls for the conclusion of negotiations by the end of the year. The deadline is not absolute, but the clock is ticking: next year, the chairman of the Conference of Provinces and Territories is Lucien Bouchard. Like it or not, Ottawa will have to deal with him.

3. I do not think this disastrous course of events will precipitate the resignation of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien before the beginning of the year 2000. But there will be a price to pay. It looks almost certain that, within six months, the Parliament of Canada will have to deal with some form of legislation setting the conditions for Québec's secession.

This will have to be done in co-operation with the province, at a time when Bouchard chairs the Premier's Conference. Try to figure that one! Even though I consider myself that it would be absolutely legitimate, it will not be appropriate. I think it will do nothing but raise the level of “ferveur” Bouchard keeps referring to as one of his “winning conditions” for a referendum on sovereignty.

4. By the way, will there be a referendum? You will hear those who say Bouchard will make another turn, another “*virage*.” Don't bet too much money on that.

True, Bouchard is not a real separatist, even less a secessionist. As they say: “Québec wants to become an independent country while not separating from Canada.” This would mean that the rest of Canada would consider Québec as a distinct part of the federation, and that Ottawa would consider a massive devolution of powers—with full compensation of course—to Québec. After the fail-



ures of the Meech Lake and Charlottetown agreements, I do not see that happening.

To say the least, next Monday's election will mark the beginning of a permanent unsettlement in the relations between Canada and Québec. How patient will the rest of Canada be, particularly in the West? This time, the election of Lucien Bouchard, and the formidable demise of Jean Charest, may put in motion a dynamic that will be difficult to control.

Of course, the improbable might occur. The vote for Action Démocratique could be such that it would deprive the Parti Québécois of a decisive victory. At this time, I cannot find one serious observer to predict such an outcome. But in Montréal, Mayor Pierre Bourque was re-elected. And the Republicans fared badly in the last election to the US House of Representatives.

Please, call me if I am wrong. I will be only too happy to oblige!